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REMEMBER EAST TIMOR

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Bishop of New York, 1972-1989

An address given at the Oxford Conference on East Timor, December 8, 1990

As oppresive regimes crumble throughtout the world, and wars and rumors of wars threaten the stability of the entire globe, it is easy to forget some small places where human rights are still savagely denied. East Timor is such a place. It is easy to forget Pearl Harbor Day, December 7, 1975, when Indonesia invaded and brutally occupied this former colony of Portugal. When Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt called it "A day that will live in infamy." When President Suharto invaded East Timor, his action was encouraged by Secretary of State Kissinger and President Ford.

At the suggestion of Asia Watch, part of a human rights organization based in New York, my wife Brenda and I went to East Timor just a year ago. Indonesia had opened the territory to visitors several months beforehand. The Pope had visited East Timor

several weeks earlier, at which time student demonstrations against the Indonesian occupation were broken up by the military in a brutal fashion. When the American Ambassador to Indonesia, John Monjo, visited Dili several weeks after us, he witnessed similar police action even though he requested that the demonstrators, with some of whom he had extended conversations, be left alone.

Before travelling to East Timor, we spent some days in Jakarta interviewing a wide cross-section of people to help familiarize ourselves with the situation. Our meetings with the Timorese people were in obscure places where they would not be noticed. They were apprehensive and intensely afraid of the authorities. This prepared us somewhat for what we would find in East Timor itself.

On the plane to Dili, we noticed a burly and important-looking man, accompanied by an entourage. When we arrived at our hotel, we found him there. He was the head of the Indonesian secret police, we were told later.

Some of you have been to the Hotel Tourismo and you know that much of the social life of Dili takes place in its courtyard. The rooms are on the second floor opening off a wide porch where guests can gather. The secret police passed the time of day there smoking cigars and surveying the patio below as they looked after their boss and General Benny Murdani, the Minister of Defense, an architect of the repression in East Timor whose harsh attitude and enforcement of Indonesian laws and culture on the Timorese are well-known.

As soon as we arrived at the hotel, our interpreter went next door to the Bishop's residence to see if he would receive us. Bishop Belo gave us an appointment later that afternoon, but when we sat down on his patio, he was strangely silent. I told him why we had come, that we were deeply concerned about the situation, and that we wanted to learn as much as possible so that when we returned to the U.S. we could try to help. Mgr. Belo did not say a word. I became embarrassed by his silence and stopped speaking myself. Brenda took up the conversation, and finally, haltingly, he began to speak.

I go into this detail to give you an idea of the atmosphere of fear that obtains there. We had not been able to write ahead or telephone, because overseas telephone conversations are tapped and the mail examined by the military. It is no wonder that even when we had presented our letter of introduction, Bishop Belo was wary of us. He is a courageous and beleaguered man. Ever since he wrote and made public a letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations requesting a referendum on self-determination for East Timor, he has been harrassed by the authorities and even criticized by his fellow churchmen.

Bishop Belo told us of false arrests, of youths being tortured and made to confess to what they had not done. He spoke of the demonstrations at the time of the Pope's visit and the arrests that followed. He told us that a dozen young men were living in his residence as a sanctuary. He spoke of disappearances. He also told us, with what seemed like a singular lack of enthusiasm, that the new Cathedral was to be dedicated on Friday morning. We said we would come.

The following day we interviewed some other clergy. For security reasons, they took us to a house outside the city and we conversed in a suffocatingly hot room with all the doors and windows closed. In hushed tones, they spoke of more atrocities, of how the military had terrorized a school while searching for alleged leaders of demonstrations. They said the soldiers even fired their weapons inside the school. One amusing story described a telephone conversation being interrupted by the monitor asking them to speak in Indonesian because the monitor did not understand Portuguese.

Other accounts we received substantiated what the clergy told us of abuses and cruelties. And it seemed that everyone who was observed talking with us was later interrogated by the authorities as to the nature of our conversations.

We were up at six to attend the Cathedral dedication. What a splendid business! The spacious courtyard was filled with thousands of people, many in their native dress. We were on the edge of the crowd, trying

unsuccessfully to look inconspicuous with my very white face towering above the crowd and my very white hair glistening in the morning sun. In any case, the Bishop saw us and sent an acolyte over to ask us to follow the procession into the Cathedral. It is magnificent: Gothic in style, shining white against the blue sky. We processed in and much to our surprise were seated on velvet chairs in the front row next to the notorious Benny Murdani. The high point for me was the offertory procession in which people from the interior brought forth their produce as offerings, including some beautiful and noisy chickens!

The story of how the Cathedral came to be built provides a fascinating insight into the politics of church and state in East Timor. Apparently, the Dean of the Cathedral is close to the Indonesian government. He persuaded them to build the Cathedral as a gesture of good will to the people and as a way of silencing the Bishop. As someone said, "If you put an apple in the pig's mouth, it cannot speak." The Cathedral was erected, but the Bishop continues to speak!

After the Mass, we were off to Baucau and Fatumaca, a four hour drive east of Dili. Since that is one of the areas where much of the fighting has taken place, we had a hard time finding a car that would take us there. Finally, someone known to our interpreter consented. The windows would not open in his dilapidated car and the roof was so low that I looked like a wounded pretzel at the end of the journey. But it was worth it. The deeper we penetrated the countryside the more in evidence were the military. In Dili, we had noticed soldiers in battle dress patrolling the streets. On the drive up, we passed many truckloads of fully armed troops, artillery pieces, tanks, barracks - in short, the indications of a full-scale military occupation. We were told that 24,000 troops were then on the island, allegedly to defned East Timor from what the authorities say are three or four hundred poorly armed Fretilin guerillas who, it should be noted, have officially renounced Marxism. We were stopped four or five times and questioned by military police. We were asked to turn back, and only because our interpreter is related to an important military official whose name was

well-known were we allowed to proceed.

I was in the Marines as an infantry officer for four years in World War II and was in combat in the Solomon Islands. I have visited other combat zones - Saigon in 1970, South Africa, Nicaragua. Let me tell you, East Timor is a fully occupied country operating for all intents and purposes under martial law. Nor has the situation improved since then. In an Agence France Presse article dated October 28, 1990, a clerical source in Dili is quoted as saying, "Never before has the situation been so terrible or so tense." A nine o'clock curfew has been established because of violence in the streets. Men in black, hooded masks, suspected of being police, break into houses in the middle of the night. Nor does it seem clear who is directing policy, since the Governor is strongly on record against such abuses. Most recently, on November 20, there were news reports that Indonesian forces had entered church compounds to apprehend suspected protestors who had taken sanctuary there.

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I understand that the spontaneous youth movement is escalating. On our second visit to Mgr. Belo we met the young people in his house. Like the Fatumaca youngsters they were an impressive lot and reminded me of young Americans in the 1960´s. They were courageous and enormously idealistic. Our language barrier was difficult but with a few English words and some translation we sensed their enthusiasm for the cause of independence, their disgust for the Indonesians, and their willingness to struggle for their goals.

This nascent youth movement bears watching because it is often from the roots of youth that independence movements gather momentum. I witnessed the courage of students who had been tortured and placed in tigar cages in Vietnam in 1970, and the world observed the tragic finale in Tienamen Square in Beijing. I am worried that similar brutal treatment will be inflicted on these brave Timorese young people unless the world´s media focus on the events in East Timor. Drawing attention to and creating sympathy for Timorese youth seems to me to be one of the most important parts of our job here at this conference.

In the Baucau area we met many people and were told that in that part of the country the soldiers are something of a law unto themselves; that they harass the peasants and take over their farms for profit. The officers are said to make a great deal of money through their influence.

In the hills beyond Baucau is a beautiful school run by the Salesian Fathers. In fact, the most heartening experience of the whole trip was meeting the students in the school in Fatumaca. I wish I could do justice to their spirit: goodlooking, smiling, polite, eager, reverent, sensitive. Some of them had been falsely arrested as demonstrators during the Pope´s visit. They were tortured and some were released. Realizing his mistake, the General responsible for this flew to Fatumaca and offered the boys sports equipment, which they sorely needed. The boys told him to keep his stuff, that they only wanted the release of all of their friends. The General acquiesced, released the boys, and sent on the spurned basketballs.

We left East Timor with a deep affection for her people and great admiration for their courage. I believe in my heart that sooner or later such courage will bear fruit.

Much posturing on the part of the Indonesian government has pointed to the development they have carried out in East Timor. If the road to Baucau is an example of their work, I am not impressed. We were fortunate to bump our way across fords without a four wheel drive. This main coastal road is probably impassable during the rainy season.

According to an October 21 article in the New York Times, 570 primary schools, 85 junior high schools and 29 high schools have been built since 1975, as well as a private university and a $7 million polytechnic institute. That is all to the good, if true. However, if the main purpose of the schools is the teaching of Indonesian culture to recalcitrant children, the buildings become a mockery. The same article quotes a middle-aged Timorese as saying, "It is the right way, but for many of us, it only solidifies

the occupation and is another form of control. They killed too many people to expect anyone to love them. The Portuguese left us alone. They did not do much for us, but they lived among us, not over us. We felt more free."

Many feel that any employment and economic advantage growing from development will benefit primarily the increasing and alarming numbers of foreigners who are presently immigrating to East Timor. Already, street fights occur between Timorese youth and the young people from abroad.

The glaring backdrop to all events and words in East Timor is the obliteration of more than 100,000 people - and possibly much more than that - as a result of the Indonesian invasion. This may well be a higher loss per capita than occurred in the killing fields of Cambodia. Certainly no economic development, no tourism will be possible until an authentic peace comes to that land.

Furthermore, many millions more have been spent on an unnecessarily large military establishment to hold back the weakened Fretilin guerillas. In my view, plunder and the opportunity for military training for the Indonesian army are the real reasons for the presence of these troops, that and the enforcement of cultural genocide upon the Timorese people.

This brings us to a most delicate point: whether we should fully back the movement for self-determination under the auspices of the United Nations, or settle merely for the restoration of human rights. The policy of the United States, as I understand it, is to accept the de facto occupation by Indonesia and only make objections to blatant human rights abuses, as Ambassador Monjo did on his trip last January. Bishop Belo is often criticized for raising the hope of self-determination when the odds of its occurring are so slim. He says, however, that such a prospect is all that keeps people's hopes alive. And we all must remember how forlorn a hope the liberation of Eastern Europe seemed just a few short months ago. History is full

of catastrophies but also is full of extraordinary surprises.

In any case, I feel strongly that the policy of the United States must be changed. Thanks to the perserverance of Congressman Tony Hall and his staff, and the vigorous work of others, for the first time a majority of the U.S. House of Representatives have signed a letter to the Secretary of State asking the State Department to use its influence to press for the observance of human rights in East Timor and to ensure the meeting of humanitarian needs. Severe hunger is an ever-present threat - if not a reality - for many Timorese, and the increase in tuberculosis continues. The Hall letter also urges the United States to press for a peace conference in which all interested parties, including representatives of the Timorese people, would take part.

Senator Pell, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, at our request addressed a similar letter to the Secretary of State. We will work toward hearings on the subject or other Senate action in the new year.

Also, it may well be that we hesitate to draw attention to our support of Indonesia´s invasion, that flagrant breach of international law, when we stand so self-righteously against the invasion of Kuwait. There, of course, the main reason is the same...oil.

In April, we took part in a highly informative conference on East Timor at the University of Porto. We later called on President Soares, the Foreign Minister, and the responsible Parliamentary Committee, who were discussing whether and under what circumstances they sould visit East Timor. We urged them to go, even though some protocol niceties might need to be ignored. Exposure of the situation there by a committee of the Portuguese Parliament would, it seems to me, be most helpful in bringing the eyes of the world to bear once more on that battered land, even if the visit does not lead to a final settlement.

Activities in the European Community and vigorous leadership on the part of Portugal could have its influence on the U.S. With

I feel particularly strongly about the United States' responsibility in this regard because of the vicious role Secretary of State Kissinger played in the events surrounding the invasion fifteen years ago: according to a State Department memorandum published on October 29, 1990 in the Nation, the oldest American weekly, Kissinger supported the Indonesian invasion. Other evidence on the public record confirms this view. And Congressional testimony by American officials in 1977 made it clear that roughly 90 percent of the arms available to the Indonesian military in 1975 were furnished by the U.S. Our hands are bloody.

The alleged reason for the invasion at that time involved the supposed Communist threat which a Fretilin-dominated East Timor would have brought about as the Vietnam War was ending. No such threat presently exists, if it ever did. Now, it seems that oil may be of prime concern. The illegal Timor Gap Treaty between Australia and Indonesia and our unwillingness to criticize either of our allies in that regard seems to be one of our present reasons for maintaining the status quo.

such pressure from the outside and the increased attention on the problem within government circles in Washington, I believe the present policy, a holdover from the Kissinger era, could be altered. Furthermore, there is always a chance of some political movement within Indonesia itself.

Finally we come to the United Nations. We testified at the Decolonization Committee hearing last August, and have since had discussions with a range of diplomats both at the U.N. and elsewhere. It was indicated to us that pressure from the European Community and the United States were essential to the peace process. Further, diplomatic sources have indicated that the location of East Timor at the easternmost tip of the Indonesian archipelago would be less threatening to Jakarta than an island near the center. It was also implied that some face-saving solution, some quid pro quo, must be offered Indonesia as part of a final settlement. Also, from all that we have been able to gather, the negotiations between Portugal and Indonesia are not proceeding with much vigor.

The Persian Gulf cloud may have a silver ling or two. It has strengthened the U.N.´s prestige and has given it a major role in the attempt to roll back the invasion of a small nation by a large neighbor on the grounds of international law, human decency, and human rights. "We cannot let such an act of aggresion go unpunished," President Bush says with great pomp and circumstance and with a modicum of self-righteousness. These identical words could be used about East Timor. The irony is that the U.S.A., as has been pointed out, helped engineer the East Timor aggresion. Now, however, having reiterated our belief in international law and human rights for all the world to hear, might we not face up to Mr. Suharto, as we have faced up to another former friend, Mr. Saddam Hussein, and request that he withdraw from East Timor, void the Timor Gap Treaty, and allow East Timor to determine its own destiny?

This is an optimistic conclusion, but the people of East Timor deserve nothing less. There is no time to lose, for even as I write, reports come in of intensified

conflict and severe human rights abuses. At any time it would be possible for a massive Indonesian force to go into action, while other nations are preoccupied by the Persian Gulf.